

# COMING TO TERMS WITH THE FRIGHTFUL PARENT: VIDEO ART AND TELEVISION

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For much of its brief history, video art has been searching for its reason for being. As soon as it emerged in the 1960s from the coupling of newly available technology with the New York art world, video art sought legitimation. Such legitimation was essential for artists seeking funders, for curators seeking audiences, and for critics seeking meaning. And for the most part this legitimation has been provided in the terms of either the museum or the medium that David Antin dubbed "video's frightful parent": television (Antin 1986: 149).

The museum has offered (albeit often grudgingly) an embrace in part at least because video art has been seen as extending the concerns of what Martha Rosler has identified as "old-fashioned Formalist Modernism" (Rosier 1986: 250). No such embrace,

however has been proffered either by or towards television, and the relationship has invariably been one of opposition. Especially for artists in the United States, television has offered a target for attack, critique, pastiche, appropriation and subversion, as well as (occasionally) envy. And for critics television has been the object against which video can be defined and defended. (It should be noted that these remarks are prompted by the history of video art in the United States. Broadcast television has been less central, though still significant, to artists' video outside the USA, in part at least because the mainstream medium has exhibited far greater variety in Europe and elsewhere.)

The inadequacies of the formalist legitimization has been considered elsewhere, notably by Rosier in her important essay, "Shedding the Utopian Moment" (Rosier: 250). This essay concerns the origins and the problems of video's legitimization *against* television. There is no doubt that the essential opposition between video and television has been central both to the preoccupation and achievements of many artists working with video and to much of the discussion about video art. But my concern is to argue that this idea was, as it remains, grounded in a narrow and limited critique of television; that it has contributed considerably to the video art world's far from fruitful hermeticism; and (perhaps most importantly) that it could prevent artists from recognizing contemporary changes within television and the possibilities that these may open up.

That television has been profoundly important in shaping the development of video art is accepted by most commentators on the medium. As the myths that pass as history have it, television and artists' video were entangled from the earliest emergence of the younger form. Most historical surveys of video art begin with the exhibitions by Wolf

Vostell (in Cologne in 1959, remounted in New York in 1963) and Nam June Paik (Wuppertal, 1963 and New York, 1965) which incorporated television sets into artworks. These artists' fascination with television and their simultaneous rejection of it (Paik distorted the images; Vostell broke, daubed with paint and even shot at the sets) were soon to become familiar concerns for many creators.

As video art has developed, many writers, including numerous artists, have accepted and asserted video's essential opposition to television. For some, this is an article of faith, as it was for the artist and critic Douglas Davis back in 1970: "The greatest honor we can pay television is to reject it" (Davis 1978: 33). Others are equally emphatic, if a little less blunt. In a recent study of artists' video, the Dutch critic Rob Perree states, "There is a fundamental incompatibility of interests and principles between the artist and the television maker" (Perree 1988: 53). And the curator Kathy Huffman writes in 1984, "Video art is fundamentally different from broadcast television and has been since its inception. Where broadcast television addresses a mass audience, video art is intensely personal—a reflection of individual passions and consciousness" (Huffman: 1984).

These commentators, along with many others, speak of television as if it were a medium defined by a single essence. They fail to recognize that their remarks draw on only *one conception* of the medium. This conception, unsurprisingly, is derived from understandings of the model of commercial network television in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and from the particular intellectual climate of the time, which was broadly antagonistic to popular culture.

It hardly needs stating—except that it is often forgotten—that the model of U.S. commercial network television is neither the sole nor the inevitable form of the medium. The negative and hostile attitudes toward television still held by many artists and critics today ( and of course by many others ) perhaps fail to take sufficient account of the extraordinary potential of television, and of the ways in which audiences use television in their lives, in their imaginations, in their fantasies. Seen in a context broader than commercial broadcasting in the United States, television is not nearly as homogeneous as the dominant conception assumes. Nor are audiences as undifferentiated and as passive as the mainstream intellectual approach holds them to be.

Consider two videotapes made in the 1970s which take television as their subject: *Television Delivers People* (1973) by Richard Serra and Carlota Faye Schoolman and the Ant Farm collective's *Media Burn* (1975). Both tapes still feature prominently in exhibitions and anthologies, and both are frequently discussed and referred to in writings about video. The central, spectacular images of the latter—a customized Cadillac crashing through a wall of blazing television sets—is also often reproduced in books and articles, as well as on postcards.

*Television Delivers People* simply scrolls a text of discrete sentences up the screen while Muzak plays on the soundtrack. The sentences offer a strident critique of the operations of television: "The product of television, commercial television, is the audience." "You are the product of tv." "Commercial television defines the world so as not to threaten the status quo." "You are the controlled product of news programming" (Schneider and Korot 1976: 114). The tape lasts six minutes.

*Media Burn* is more than twice as long as *Television Delivers People*, and considerably more fun. The tape records the preparations for the collision of car and television, the mainstream media interest that the event generated, and the carnival atmosphere of the day. But the appearance of a John Kennedy lookalike introduces an element that is just as didactic as *Television Delivers People*. "Kennedy" delivers a spoof Independence Day address: "Mass media monopolies control people by their control of information...Who can deny that we are a nation addicted to television and the constant flow of media? Now I ask you, my fellow Americans, haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen?" (Schneider and Korot 1976: 11). And this, of course, is the desire acted out on a mythic level in the crash that follows.

Each tape flaunts its oppositional attitude to television, both in the texts quoted and in the form employed. The deadpan presentation of a text in *Television Delivers People* asserts itself against the glossy visuals of commercial broadcasting, just as the rough, video verite of *Media Burn* is intended to contrast with the far more controlled and "professional" look of mainstream news and documentary production.

Both tapes were framed by, and contributed to, the intellectual discourse about television in the United States. This discourse in turn was shaped in the 1960s in a climate antagonistic to popular culture in general, and to television specifically. For while fine artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein may have embraced television in their work, the overwhelming majority of intellectuals in the United States vehemently rejected it. In his enlightening collection of essays *No Respect—Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross argues convincingly that, by the beginning of the 1960s, for many writers and critics

"...television had become the latest unredeemable object in the continuing debate about mass culture" (Ross 1989: 104-105).

In the post war world, the thinking of Frankfurt School intellectuals Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (both of whom spent the 1940s in the States) was particularly influential in framing for many American intellectuals their view of mass culture. Their ideas "reflected the breakdown of modern German society into fascism" comments David Morley, "a breakdown which was attributed, in part, to the loosening of traditional ties and structures and seen as leaving people atomized and exposed to external influences and especially to the pressure of the mass propaganda of powerful leaders, the most effective agency of which was the mass media. This "pessimistic mass society thesis" stressed the conservative and reconciliatory role of "mass culture" for the audience (Morley 1980: 1). The polemical attacks of Adorno and Horkheimer on the barbarian influences of the "culture industry" propagated the view that popular forms like the cinema and television were, in Ross' words, "profitable opiates(s), synthetically prepared for consumption for a society of automatons" (Ross 1989: 50).

Commercial television as it had evolved since 1945 appeared to many to be the embodiment of such an idea. And the quiz show scandals of 1959, in which contestants admitted that they had been prompted to cheat by the program producers, reinforced for many critics the sense of the medium as not only banal and absurd, but also deceptive and grossly manipulative. Ross quotes Gilbert Seldes asserting that, "next to the H Bomb, no force on earth is as dangerous as television" (Ross 1989: 105). And the view of television held by the social, cultural and intellectual elite of Camelot was expressed by President

Kennedy's Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow in his celebrated 1961 speech attacking television as a "vast wasteland". The high-culture echo of T.S. Eliot was presumably appreciated by those concerned to preserve the cultural values of an earlier time.

Following Adorno et al, watching television in the 1960s was seen as the simple, passive consumption of "messages". A parallel strand of modernist thought lamented the unrealized potential of the mass media which, under capitalism, was a one-way process of transmission from the center band reception by the mass. One of the texts extensively quoted in critical essays about video art was Bertolt Brecht's short note, "The Radio as an Apparatus for Communication". Brecht had originally published this in 1932, but it only became available in English in a collection edited by John Willett in 1964.

...(Q)uite apart from the dubiousness of its functions, radio is one-sided when it should be two-... It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication...the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers (included in Hanhardt 1986: 53).

John Hanhardt, writing in 1984, sees television in terms exactly parallel with Brecht's sense of radio: "(Television) was not the communications medium it claimed to

be, but rather, a one-way channel, broadcasting programmes that admitted no innovation" (Hanhardt 1984: 55-56). And this view was supported by the most fashionable guru of cultural analysis in the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard:

(The media) fabricates non-communication—this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of speech and response, and thus of responsibility...They speak, or something is spoken there, but in such a way as to exclude any response anywhere. (Baudrillard 1986: 128-129)

Brecht's original ideas, together with Walter Benjamin's enthusiasm for the radical democratic potential of film (expressed in his influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" written 1936; translated 1969; included in Hanhardt 1986: 27-52) were taken up in the 1960s by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Enzensberger too was convinced of the promise of media technology. But capitalism had as yet ensured that his promise remained unfulfilled. "Monopoly capitalism" he observes in "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" (1974) "develops the consciousness-shaping industry more quickly and more extensively than other sectors of production; it must at the same time fetter it" (included in Hanhardt 1986: 97).

As Andrew Ross summarizes Enzensberger's position:

He proposed that the promises inherent in communication technology—participation, decentralization, mobilization, education—ought to be more fully realized. Every receiver is also a transmitter! Enzensberger's slogan spoke directly to ways of transforming the means of production (it had less to say about the actual conditions of consumption), and it was a direct injunction to the New Left to abandon its technophobic allegiances to pre-industrial forms of communication, and to make "proper strategic use of the most advanced media" (Ross 1989: 121).

Such brief quotations from, and summaries of, these important texts almost inevitably misrepresent their subtle arguments. But the writings are now familiar (perhaps overfamiliar) cornerstones of the understanding of television and video in the United States. The Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger essays are three of the introductory essays in Hanhardt's widely-read collection *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (alongside further chunks of cultural pessimism from Louis Althusser and Baudrillard). And the quotations above help identify the essential attitudes towards television among radical thinkers from the 1960s on: suspicion, disdain and rejection on the one hand, and the urgency of a response to expose the workings of the media and promote participation rather than passivity. These are the same attitudes exemplified by the critical writings about video quoted earlier, and by the two tapes discussed.

The broader backdrop to these debates was, of course, the political activism of the 1960s, and the anti-authoritarian impetus of much social and cultural activity. In many spheres distinct from the media there were demands for the replacement of passivity by participation, and through the 1970s campaigns for political change were often aided and documented by videomakers. The promotion of the idea of cultural participation took a number of forms, including the simple encouragement of neophytes to pick up a video camera and make their own tapes. A different strategy, drawn from the traditions of literary modernism, was the production of an open, fragmented, challenging text which would force the viewer to work to participate, so as to make sense of it. (A related approach was adopted by the makers of certain video installation works, which inserted the viewer, or her or his image, into the environment and so promoted a more active relationship with the work. Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette's *Wipe Cycle* (1969) is a significant example of this approach.)

Participation was sometimes understood in ways which may now strike us as bizarre. The most influential of the pop culture gurus, Marshall McLuhan, for example, conceived of such participation, at least with regard to television, in terms of an involuntary bodily response. His enthusiasm for cool media like television (along with the telephone and the comic strip) was based on the idea that because they were low on both definition and information, they demanded that viewers participate more by filling up the images. McLuhan, however, could be as negative towards the medium as the most entrenched ivory tower critic. This is from an extended interview published in 1967:

TV, in a highly visual culture, drives us inward in depth into a totally non-visual universe of involvement. It is destroying our entire political, educational, social, institutional life. TV will dissolve the entire fabric of society in a short time. If you understood its dynamics, you would choose to eliminate it as soon as possible (as quoted by Ross 1989: 119).

Given the prevalence of (perhaps slightly less extreme variants of) such attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s, the convenience, and indeed the possibilities, of being able to legitimize video *an against* television are apparent. Early video exhibition titles, such as "TV as a Creative Medium" (1969) and "Vision and Television" (1970) reflect the desire both to acknowledge the frightful parent, but also to challenge it. At the time creativity and vision could be assumed to be so clearly antithetical to television, or rather to the predominant understandings of television, that just linking these qualities with the idea of television was inevitably to offer opposition to that idea. Many among the target audiences of these shows—from the art world and museums, from critics and later from funding agencies and those who sat on their panels—certainly shared the attitudes to television sketched above, and so the legitimation of the fledgling medium of video against television was perfectly acceptable, and for many must have seemed excitingly radical.

Now consider an excerpt from a videotape about television made ten years after *Television Delivers People*. The shot is of a young girl lying on the floor watching an off-screen television. As she tells her story, two adults—seen only from the waist down—appear behind her. .

"The last time I saw my parents kiss was twenty-five years ago" she remembers, "I was lying on the living room floor watching TV. *Dragnet* was on and that music, that horribly scary music was filling the room and my soul with pure terror, it was a show about Friday's partner, who'd just been killed in action. Here I was trying to feel safe and secure in the good TV graces of Sargeant Friday and instead I was plugging my ears and shaking. That's the way I watch *Dragnet* week after week. Then my parents came in to say goodnight. They were going to a party. Mom looked so pretty in her orange sequined dress. And Dad looked so handsome in his blue metallic suit. They bent over to say goodbye and then embraced and kissed right in front of the TV set. Then they walked out just as that horrible music reverberated through the entire house. This time I didn't have to plug my ears. Their kiss made me sfong enough to watch the final credits without shuddering" (Desmarais 1990: 54).

This is from Ilene Segalove's *Why I Got Into TV and Other Stories*, a tape that seems not to be exhibited, nor to be written about, nearly as much as *Television Delivers People*. Nor does the critical consensus that exists accord Segalove's tape a reputation anywhere close to the stature of Serra and Schoolman's piece. Yet it is comparably bold and simple, and it challenges the conventions of television language at least as effectively

with its knowing re-framing of a domestic encounter. The tape (unlike *Television Delivers People*) also has great charm and humor, and it wants to be watched and enjoyed.

Unlike most artists' videotapes about television, this section of *Why I Got Into TV* is also about a particular program. The tape is so delicate, funny and pleasing that it would be too easy to overburden it with a complex analysis, but it is important to recognize that the tape explores how that program was part of one young girl's fears and fantasies, and how it became part of her life. And unlike most artists' tapes which protest the means of television production and urge resistance, this is a tape about consumption, about watching television and making it a part of your life. Nor is consumption here simply passive reception, a process in which the viewer is manipulated by the consciousness industry. Instead, it is simply an element of everyday life, an element that gets mixed up with everything else going on, and an element that can enrich and deepen one moment of the girl's relationship with her parents.

The understanding of television encapsulated in Segalove's tape, parallels an analysis of mass media which has been developed, primarily in Britain, over the past twenty years. This has come to be known as the "uses and gratifications" model, and its central idea is summed up in this suggestion from one of its pioneers, James Halloran: "We must get away from the habit of thinking in terms of what the media do to people and substitute for it the idea of what people do with the media" (as quoted by Morley 1980: 12).

As with the post-Frankfurt School ideas explored above, this model (and its subsequent refinements, adjustments and often radical re-workings by researchers such as

David Morley) can be presented here only in sketch form. Mick Counihan's 1972 summary, however, is useful as a pointer to the main ideas:

...(A)udiences were found to 'attend to' and 'perceive' media messages in a selective way, to tend to ignore or to subtly interpret those messages hostile to their particular viewpoints. Far from possessing ominous persuasive and other anti-social power, the media were now found to have a more limited and, implicitly, more benign role in society; not changing, but 'reinforcing' prior dispositions, not cultivating 'escapism' or passivity, but capable of satisfying a great diversity of 'uses and gratifications', not instruments of a levelling of culture, but of its democratization (Morley 1980: 6).

It is notable, however, that ideas such as these are almost never reflected in the approaches to television within artists' videotapes. *Why I Got Into TV and Other Stories* is remarkable (as are other tapes by Segalove) precisely because it is concerned with the "uses and gratifications" that one viewer derives from one television program, and with her active and strongly participatory relationship with it. For all its seeming fragility and inconsequentiality, *Why I Got Into TV* is an important challenge to the deep-seated and endlessly repeated orthodoxy that "television delivers people".

If the reception of television can be understood as offering far more than was allowed by the ideas dominant from the 1960s on, so should the production of the medium. Twenty years ago, television in the United States comprised only network affiliates and local stations that wished to be network affiliates, together with the worthy but desperately underfunded public broadcasting stations. PBS operators are still underfunded today, and throughout the system the underlying commercial imperative is no less important. Yet the television ecology is now far, far more varied, with numerous cable and satellite services supplementing and challenging the no longer overwhelmingly dominant networks. As the critic Marita Sturken recognized in 1984:

Network television as we have known it is slowly becoming obsolete. Vast, expensive, centralized, inflexible, it is the dinosaur of the 1980s and 90s gradually giving way to an electronic entertainment industry that includes multiple channels, increased distribution via satellite, home recorders, and, for viewers, radically new elements of choice.

Abroad, of course, since television started, there have been alternative modes of financing, production and distribution quite different from those of the commercial networks. And in the last decade, despite the drive in many countries towards deregulation of state controls and increasing market pressures which are thought by many to stifle distinctive services, new television organizations like Channel 4, London and France's

Canal Plus and La Sept have demonstrated remarkable possibilities for the funding and exhibition of a very wide range of work.

Political, economic and technological forces working on television today throughout the world are bringing a greater differentiation and variety to the medium than ever before. To some degree, since the changes are taking place at a dizzying pace, such a statement has to be as much article of faith as informed and accurate analysis. But as the number of services throughout the world proliferates, and as audiences fragment into a multitude of new configurations, many new possibilities—for artists, just as for other moving image makers—are opened up. The appetite of this vast industry is voracious, and elements of it no longer need to appeal, as did the American networks, to the largest mass audiences. Indeed, services will increasingly target specific demographic and particular interest groups. To attract these audiences, they will also need to define and present themselves as distinct alternatives to the dominant structures.

Moreover, distribution will no longer be constrained by broadcasting models and technologies which carry their own impetus towards maximizing an audience. The idea of television already encompasses more than just what comes out of the air or down the cable. Cassettes and video games have begun to give us a quite new sense of the possibilities of the box in the corner, and this is likely to develop rapidly with, for example, the introduction of interactive compact disc (CD-I) systems in the next two years. CD-I, backed by Sony and Phillips, offers the possibility of interactive moving images for the domestic set. A wide range of uses are envisaged, including educational discs, games and interactive dramas.

The production of programming primarily intended for broadcast will inevitably continue. But this seems likely to be increasingly lower cost (or comparatively so), rapid turn-over programming, such as game shows, soaps, sports and news. Alongside this, production and distribution of discrete programs like dramas and documentaries, as well as artists' tapes, may follow more and more closely a publishing, rather than a broadcasting, model. Different sources of finance will be brought together to fund a single production, and a wide range of distribution outlets may be possible. Television exhibition may be one of these, but so, for example, will cassette or video disc distribution.

Such broad strokes of speculation can suggest that in the coming decade there will be (at least in an international context) a far greater variety of production funding and financing, the number and range of distribution systems will continue to increase, as will possibilities for exhibition, and relationships between televisions and audiences will be understood in new ways. All of which should offer important opportunities and challenges for everyone, including artists, working with moving images.

In crudely commercial terms, artists are in many ways well-placed to exploit the opportunities which are opening up. As sources of novel, distinctive and powerfully-presented ideas and images, they should be sought after by at least some of the new television structures. And as artisanal producers, their costs are often (comparatively) low, and copyrights and ownership are (comparatively) straightforward.

For two reasons, however, this essay is not intended to conjure up the vision of a new television utopia for artists' video. The first reason is, obviously, that most of the new

services already do, and will continue to share the languages, values and ideologies familiar from the commercial networks. But it seems likely that the images will no longer be as rigidly directed towards audience maximization and profit as they once were. The dominant languages will no longer be quite as dominant, and alternatives will be recognized and even valued. The contradictions of television, and of the meanings and ideas offered by it, may become richer, stronger and more exciting.

The production and exhibition contexts opening up will inevitably entail limitations and constraints, just as do those of the gallery and the museum. Television's limitations will be different, but they will not necessarily be more onerous. What seems important is that the video art world's dominant ideas about television, as sketched above, should not prevent the widest range of responses.

Recent history, however, suggests that the blinkers about television may remain. As has been suggested, the range and richness of television has rarely been recognized in the majority of tapes produced by artists. Nor has it often been acknowledged by curators and critics writing about or assembling exhibitions or programs. As David Antin observes,

Television haunts all exhibitions of video art, though when actually present it is only minimally represented, with perhaps a few commercials or "the golden performances" of Ernie Kovacs (a television "artist"); otherwise its presence is manifest mainly in quotes, allusion, parody, and protest (included in Hanhardt 1986: 148).

In part precisely because of video art's struggle for legitimation, and an inevitable defensiveness in its early years, the form has been concerned to assert its individual and distinctive histories and traditions. As a consequence, video has been confined to a limited context, and seen as separate from developments in film, in television and in other moving image media like digital animation. There are signs that this is beginning to change, and two major European exhibitions in the autumn of 1990—*Passages d'Image* at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris and *The First Biennial of the Moving Image* at the Reina Sofia Centre in Madrid—specifically address the relationships between video and other forms of the moving image. But in the past the understanding of video as separate from related media has meant that video in the eyes of both its creators and its critics, has tended to be cut off from likely enrichment by other elements of our contemporary moving image culture.

If the dominant attitudes are to change, as I believe they should, the shift may contribute to the possibly inevitable, and probably positive, dissolution of video art's current identity. Video art was never defined or legitimated internally either solely by technology or by a shared language. Nor, as I have argued, should it have been defined and legitimated primarily by reference to the external evil of television. Its identity, today as for much of its history, is an institutional one, formed and sustained by now comparatively well-established structures of curatorship, criticism and distribution. Even a slowly developing market, for installations and for archive-quality museum copies of tapes, is beginning to make a contribution to this identity.

The primarily institutional nature of video art's identity today may inhibit the

development of new relationships between artists' video on the one hand and broadcast television and new forms of moving image media on the other. (And this is the other reason why my arguments are not intended to conjure up a vision of television as a new utopia for artists' video.) The possibilities that may be opening up should be explored and exploited by all those concerned to extend the potential of moving images. And arguing and lobbying and working for the presence of something called "artists' video" will be, at best, only an exceptionally limited strategy for extending this potential. It perpetuates the idea of artists' video as distinct from, and indeed opposed to, television. And the strategy will also inevitably perpetuate television's condescension towards and marginalization of artists' work.

An alternative strategy, and one that seems to offer far more possibilities, is to work to understand the many different operations of television's new structures, and to accommodate to a limited degree to these, while still offering challenging alternatives to the dominant ideas and languages of these structures. Artists like William Wegman and John Sanborn and Mary Perillo have achieved this by working within the commercial structures of the medium. Wegman's recent sketches for Children's Television Workshop are as engaging as his earlier short works and his 1988 promo (co-directed with animator Robert Breer) for New Order's *Blue Monday (Remix)* is a joyous three minutes of image-making. Both the sketches and the promo encapsulate Wegman's individual take on the world, even if they may seem as inconsequential and as fragile as Ilene Segalove's *Why I Got Into 7V*.

Sanborn and Perillo's work is seen by some as making too great an accommodation to television, so that their manipulations of high-tech wizardry drain any substance from the work. Yet their *Untitled* (1989), made with the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones for PBS' *Alive From Off Center*, refutes any such criticism. *Untitled* is a simple, powerful and intense dance lament for Bill T. Jones' partner Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS in 1988. Driven by a passion that is both personal and political, the tape is as moving and as memorable as the finest achievements in any medium.

Two major recent tapes that achieve a different accommodation with television, yet still remain entirely distinctive, are Bill Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986) and Gary Hill's *Incidence of Catastrophe* (1988). Both were part-funded by television, the former by ZDF and the latter by Channel 4, London. For all their many differences, both engage with long-established television forms, Viola's with the natural history documentary, and Hill's with the adaptation of a classic literary text. Yet both create radical alternatives to television's dominant languages, and each emerges as a complex exploration of spirituality and identity. Both are also uncompromising in their form and structure. At the most obvious level, Viola's meditative images are held far longer than television usually permits, but it is with this reflective scrutiny of the natural world that the artist undertakes his religious quest. In a parallel manner, Hill's fragmented and dispassionately cruel self-confrontation contributes to a tape that is, in the most positive sense, profoundly unsettling. (The many problems of the strategy of working with television may be suggested by the fact

that despite supporting the production of *Incidence of Catastrophe* more than two years ago, Channel 4 has still not screened the tape.)

Each of these works by Wegman, Sanborn and Perillo, Viola and Hill offers a way forward for moving images to explore and express new ideas in new ways. Each was produced with a strand of the varied and disparate institution that television has become. Each is screened on television, as well as being shown extensively elsewhere. Each engages with television's forms, while at the same time offering alternatives. Each offers an implicit critique of the generally impoverished languages of the medium, but constructively so. Each of the works suggest that video art can see beyond the traditional attitude of rebellion towards a once-frightful parent, and so achieve a new relationship with television that both parent and offspring, together with the rest of us, will find enriching.

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## **Five Answers to the Question: What Has TV Meant in Your Life**

TV taught me alienation. I turn it on and see something that's not me.

\$75,000 on Jeopardy.

How I learned Paul McCartney got married.

Star Trek before dinner.

The only friend who hasn't run out on me.

My parents were so proud the day they saw me on tv.